

Parking survey of Pillar Point Harbor C lots

Prepared by Jean Knight, El Granada, October 27, 2025, updated November 9, 2025¹

The Burnham Strip in El Granada is a key feature of architect Daniel Burnham's 1906 master plan for El Granada. The strip was intended to be an oceanfront corridor, resort area, and buffer zone for the town. The strip is now primarily open space owned by public and private parties. The San Mateo County Harbor District (District) owns two lots on the strip and is investigating whether to use those lots, in combination with properties owned by other parties, to create a parking lot and greenspace area on the northern half of Burnham Strip.

The proposed project area extends from the north end of Burnham Strip at Capistrano Road to just south of Palma Street. The District originally stated that the main need for the parking lot is harbor overflow parking for boat trailers and trucks and indicated the lot could additionally provide parking spaces that Caltrans is required to create for Surfers Beach. Later, the District also referred to overflow car parking, and in the Request for Proposals (RFP) for the project, the District instructed bidders to assume the lot would be for automobiles only. The District's consultant has proposed three alternatives to date: two on District-owned property on Burnham Strip and one on the west side of highway 1.²

The need for harbor overflow parking has been questioned; however, the beliefs that overflow parking is or is not needed have appeared to be based on anecdotal observations. No parking study has been done for the harbor. To help fill that gap, I documented parking conditions at the harbor C lots, which include the boat trailer parking. Note that the survey findings are restricted to documented observations and are not professional opinions. Also note that this is not a District project. The observations are my own only. The District has received a copy of this survey but has not reviewed it for accuracy.

1 Summary

The lot was surveyed for 24 weeks, from February 22 through April 30 and July 14 through October 16, and was photographed on representative days to provide visual documentation. After the main survey was complete, a boat trailer overflow event occurred on November 9 during crab season. This draft has been updated to include that event, too. The following survey findings focus on the main proposed uses, harbor overflow parking and Surfers Beach parking, and apply to all three proposed parking lot alternatives.

Adequacy of existing parking lot capacity: State Division of Boating and Waterways guidelines for sizing harbor parking lots state: "There should be a sufficient number of each type of parking space provided to meet the expected demand on a normal peak day during the boating season. Using a summer weekend holiday to establish parking demand will probably result in a facility that is overbuilt and too

¹ Updated to include November 9 crab season event and reorganized to reduce repetition of information.

² Harbor District General Manager's Activity Report for September 2025/October 2025, October 15, 2025.

large for the normal daily and weekly demands during the season.”³ Assuming the survey observations are representative, the current C lots provide this, with utilization rates on normal non-holiday weekends for trailers ranging from 2% to 66%, with an average of 18%; and for cars, ranging from 23% to 97%, with an average of 46%.

Boat trailer overflow parking: Harbor overflow parking was related to boat trailer overflow during four key fishing events, for a total of six days. This is consistent with the District’s estimate of overflow parking “4 or 5 times per year”.⁴ The rare overflow from fishing events are the special events the State guidelines warn against for sizing a lot. All but one overflow event was for the fishing season openers, which are known dates; a possible alternative to a new lot is to arrange for overflow parking space in advance with local businesses.

Car overflow parking: No car overflow observed on highway 1, even during peak times and holidays. Generally, C lot car spaces were always available. In a few cases, the C lot car spaces were near full occupancy, but cars still found spaces, usually due to turnover of car spaces. There was also occasional use of open trailer spaces. Although cars were observed parking on highway 1, the parking appeared primarily related to Surfers Beach, the fishing pier, businesses south of the harbor, and people pulling over for the view. Even when highway 1 was observed densely parked in, the harbor C lots often had ample parking available.

Visibility of harbor parking lots: The harbor parking lots are not visible from highway 1 in either direction, even though the lots are immediately adjacent to the highway. No sign at the entrance at Capistrano Road alerts drivers to the existence of the lots. A “Public Parking” sign that also indicates access to the coastal trail could draw more drivers into the lots and possibly reduce some of the parking along highway 1.

Suitability of proposed alternatives for Surfers Beach parking: All three proposed parking lot alternatives are 0.5 to 0.7 miles from Surfers Beach, a long distance that likely will deter use of the lot for Surfers Beach. The need for convenient access is critical, as visitors typically carry children and large items like surfboards and coolers. If one of these alternatives is accepted to fulfill Caltrans’ obligation for providing Surfers Beach parking, it could paradoxically eliminate the possibility of meaningful Surfers Beach parking.

2 Parking survey details

The harbor C lots are three contiguous sections, C1, C2, and C3, with C1 closest to the harbor entrance at Capistrano Road. All sections have both trailer and car parking; however, most car parking is in lot C1 and most trailer parking is in lots C2 and C3.

³ California Department of Parks and Recreation Division of Boating and Waterways, 2021. Layout & Design Guidelines for Boat Launching Facilities.
<https://dbw.parks.ca.gov/pages/28702/files/Layout%20And%20Design%20Guidelines%20For%20Boat%20Launchin%20Facilities%202021.pdf>

⁴ November 19, 2024 District email to potentially interested parties.

The lots were surveyed for 24 weeks, from February 22 through April 30 and July 14 through October 16, at least twice a week, often 3 or 4 times. The lots were photographed on 37 days to provide visual documentation of normal weekdays and weekends and normal peak summer weekends (i.e., no holidays or special events) and of special events (holidays, fishing events). For special events, multiple photographs documented each event. Utilization rates were estimated from the photographs.

After the main survey was complete, a boat trailer overflow event occurred on November 9 during crab season. This draft has been updated to include that event, too.

2.1 State guideline for sizing harbors

The State Division of Boating and Waterways guideline for sizing a harbor parking lot is as follows:³

“There should be a sufficient number of each type of parking space provided to meet the expected demand on a normal peak day during the boating season. Using a summer weekend holiday to establish parking demand will probably result in a facility that is overbuilt and too large for the normal daily and weekly demands during the season. It not only wastes project construction funding and land use, but maintenance funds as well.”

Although the guidance warns against using summer holidays and other outliers for sizing parking, this C lot survey includes the Labor Day Holiday weekend, when it was also hot over the hill causing even higher visitor numbers, and the salmon season of September 4-7, to provide additional information that may be useful. Note that such short salmon seasons will be the norm going forward for the foreseeable future, per California Department of Fish & Wildlife regulations.⁵

2.2 Utilization estimates

Occupancy of car and trailer spaces was estimated from the photographs, and the estimated utilization rates were calculated as occupancy/total number of spaces (149⁶ for cars, 119 for trailers). The following are the utilization rates estimated for the days when photographs were taken, showing the range and average. Note that trailer space utilization is influenced by ocean fishing conditions, which can be unpredictable and are independent of day of week. With special fishing events removed, however, the survey did find a difference between weekday and weekend use, with weekday use slightly less than weekend use.

Normal weekdays (non-holiday, no events, 17 days photographed): The harbor lot utilization for trailer spaces ranged from 0%-49%, with an average of 13%; and for car spaces the range was 3%-23% , with an average of 14%. See typical use in Figs. 1 and 2.

Normal weekends (non-holiday, no events, 12 weekend days photographed, of which 7 were sunny): Utilization for trailer spaces ranged from 2% to 66%, with an average of 18%. For car spaces, utilization

⁵ California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW, 2024. California Salmon Strategy for a Hotter, Drier Future: Restoring Aquatic Ecosystems in the Age of Climate Change. <https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Salmon-Strategy-for-a-Hotter-Drier-Future.pdf>.

⁶ The number of car spaces is based on physically counting the spaces in the lot, but may be off slightly because the count was interrupted at one point and a few spaces, probably 4 or fewer, may have been double-counted.

ranged from 23% to 97% (97% possibly related to a beach cleanup event that day), with an average of 46%. See Figs. 3 and 4.

Sunny weekends: Little difference was noted between sunny and overcast weekends for car parking. On sunny weekends, cars filled an average of 50% of spaces, compared with 41% on overcast days. For trailers, the numbers were 20% spaces filled on sunny weekend days, and 17% on overcast days.

Holiday weekends: August 31 (Labor Day weekend) and October 11 (Columbus Day weekend) were chosen as examples. Both days were warm and sunny, with high temperatures over the hill. The Labor Day figures (Fig. 5a and 5b) show the progression of trailer and car parking observed throughout the day. Maximum utilization was at 1 pm, with 91% of car spaces filled and 55% of trailer spaces filled. Note that some cars parked in trailer spaces (not included in the car space utilization rate), which may indicate that when the car lot areas reach capacity, trailer spaces become the overflow area. For Columbus Day (Fig. 6), parking was lighter, with 27% of car spaces filled at 1 pm, and 4% of trailer spaces filled. On this day, highway 1 had cars parked on both sides from just north of Sam's and south of the turquoise house, to Surfers Beach, despite the open parking in the harbor lot (Fig. 7).

Fishing events: Overflow trailer parking on highway 1 was observed on September 4-5 (fall salmon season), on August 10 (possibly related to NOAA Fisheries unexpectedly announcing on August 8 that the blue-fin season would end in three days), and on November 9 (second weekend of crab season with last fair weather before expected bad weather). Two other days, the June 7-8 salmon season, were not directly observed but the District reported a significant trailer parking overflow, and trailers are assumed to have been parked on the highway both days. This brings the total number of days with trailer overflow parking on highway 1 to six, and possibly seven if November 8 also had overflow. This is consistent with the District's estimate that trailer overflow occurs "4 to 5 times per year" (19 November 2024 email to potentially interested parties). The maximum number observed parking on highway 1 was 41, occurring on November 9. The other days directly observed had 22 (September 4), 8 (September 5) and 13 (August 10).

September 6 (4 trailers) and 7 (6 trailers) also had parking on highway 1, but it was not overflow. At least 16 trailer spaces were available in the lot at the time they parked, but the drivers chose to park on highway 1 instead.

One other fishing event, on August 28, came near to reaching the lot capacity, with 97% of trailer spaces filled (26% of car spaces). This may have been due to the California Fish and Game Commission's action to restore access to fishing depths for quillback rockfish, effective August 28.

Opening day of the fall salmon season, September 4, was observed throughout the day to obtain information on the timing of traffic. Both trailer and car parking reached capacity by about 7:30 am. At maximum, about 10:30 am, 22 trailers and no cars parked on highway 1. The 22 trailers included 6 trailers parked along highway 1 at the Pillar Point RV park and Harbor Village RV park; however, these were parked for more than 72 hours, and may have needed to park there regardless because of the 72-hour limit on harbor parking. Boats started returning after 8 am and by early afternoon, the parking lot was well below capacity again.

No car overflow parking was observed during these overflow trailer events. Turnover in the car spaces appeared to be constant enough that cars found parking as other cars pulled out.

2.3 Other observations

No observed car overflow parking: No harbor overflow car parking was observed on highway 1, including on holidays and sunny weekend days. The harbor lot neared or reached car capacity on a few days, but this did not result in cars parking on highway 1. Observed reasons were (1) rapid enough turnover time in the lot that allowed cars to find space as others left and (2) a few uses of trailer spaces as overflow car parking. Also, cars related to fishing tended to be parked in the early morning and gone by mid-morning to early afternoon, so the overlap with prime time for harbor shops may be relatively short. Typically, if parking demand for a lot is high and the lot is near or at capacity, many cars can be seen scouting the lot for spaces at the same time. A few cars were observed scouting during special events, but not many.

Cars parked on highway 1: Cars parked on highway 1 on most days, ranging from less than 5 to over 100 cars, but this parking did not appear related to the harbor. The parking started just north of Sam's Chowder House and continued to about Surfers Beach. All indications pointed to this parking being related to businesses south of the harbor, especially Sam's Chowder House; to Surfers Beach, including the fishing pier; and to drivers opportunistically pulling over for the view. It did not appear related to the harbor. If drivers had first tried to park in the lot, they likely would park at the first opportunity they had after exiting the lot, which would be the portion of highway 1 adjacent to the lot; however, cars were rarely observed parking adjacent to the lot.

Visibility of harbor parking lot: Due to the harbor lot's location at the base of the coastal bluff that highway 1 traverses, the harbor lot is not visible from highway 1 in either direction, even though the lot is immediately adjacent to the highway. The lot is also not visible from either direction at the light at Capistrano, which is the entry point for the harbor and harbor lot. No sign at the intersection alerts drivers to the existence of the lot. A "Public Parking" sign that also indicates access to the coastal trail could draw more drivers into the lot and possibly reduce some of the parking along highway 1.

Suitability of proposed locations for Surfers Beach parking: The proposed parking lot alternatives are 0.5-0.7 miles from Surfers Beach⁷. For the Burham Strip alternatives, this assumes pedestrians either walk from the lot to Coronado Street and cross there for the beach; or walk across highway 1 on the proposed cross-walk, down stairs or a ramp to the coastal trail, and then along the coastal trail to Surfers Beach. For the west side alternative, this assumes pedestrians walk down stairs or a ramp to the coastal trail, and then along the coastal trail to Surfers Beach. The distance may make it unlikely for most beachgoers and surfers to use the lot, given that such visitors typically are carrying large, awkward loads, e.g., blankets/tarps, coolers, and small children for beachgoers, fishing gear and coolers for people fishing off the pier, and surfboards for surfers.

⁷ Measured by Apple Maps application, with two options: One with the starting point at Sam's Chowder House and destination as Surfers Beach; the other with the starting point at India Beach Restaurant and destination as Surfers Beach.



Fig. 1. Tuesday March 4, noon. Off-season. Most restaurants are closed on Tuesdays. Example of lowest use. Upper photo: Lot C1, focusing on car parking area. Lower photo: Lot C3, where most trailer parking occurs.



Fig. 2. Wednesday, July 23, noon. Example of use on sunny summer weekday with businesses open. Upper photo: View from Lot C1 looking south to Lots C2 and C3. Lower photo: Lot C1, showing most of car park area. Reference point “A” (in white) is the common reference point for the photos.



Fig 3. Saturday, April 5, 2:50 pm. Last weekend of Spring Break. Example of typical weekend use in off-season, even with last weekend of Spring Break.
 Upper photo: View from Lot C1, looking south toward Lot C3 at top of photo.
 Lower photo and inset: Detail of Lot C1, showing more of the car park area. The inset photo is a continuation of the main photo, showing the parking to the right of the cars in the main photo. The common reference point for the photos is denoted by the white “A”.



Fig. 4. Saturday, August 9, 3 pm. Last vacation weekend before school starts. 85-102 degrees over the hill.
Top: Looking south to Lot C3 boat trailer parking from Lot C1. Bottom: Lot C1 car area.



Fig. 5a. August 31, Labor Day weekend, boat trailer parking. Temperature in 80s over the hill. Photos show the progression of parking at three times: 7:30 am (top), 9:30 am, and 1 pm (bottom).



Fig. 5b. August 31, Labor Day weekend, C1 car park area. Temperature in 80s over the hill. Photos show the progression of parking at three times: 7:30 am (top), 9:30 am, just after harbor businesses open (middle), and 1 pm (bottom).



Fig. 6. Saturday, October 11, Columbus Day weekend, 1 pm. Top photo: View from lot C1, looking south to lot C3. Bottom photo: View of C1 car park area.



Fig. 7. Parking on highway 1 on Oct 11, 2025. Top photos: Parking near Sam's Chowder House on both sides of highway. Bottom photos: Parking near Pillar Ridge RV park and Surfer's Beach. This parking was not overflow from the harbor lot, which had available capacity (Fig. 6).